

## Students gather for Peace Builders Conference

By AARON BANDLER, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Around 50 high school students gathered Saturday for a Peace Builders Conference to learn how to make their schools and communities safer.

The conference at the Carrillo Recreation Center was a collaboration between the local nonprofit AHA! and the Santa Barbara Unified School District, sponsored by the Santa Barbara Youth Council.

“We want to further inspire the Peace Builders from Santa Barbara High, San Marcos High, Carpinteria High School, La Cuesta High School, and Santa Barbara Youth Council to really further this movement of making safe and positive schools for everyone,” said Dr. Jennifer Freed, co-executive director of AHA!

Santa Barbara County 1st District Supervisor Salud Carbajal and Board of Education member Monique Limon were in attendance.

The conference involved rotating students into groups of connection circles, which featured students talking only when holding a talking piece and keeping what is said within the circle confidential.

Sessions in the connection circles started off light with a list “coyote questions.” Students would answer such questions as “If you were stranded on a desert island, what 3 items would you choose?” and “If you had to be named another name, what would you call yourself?”

The next stage was speaking about such subjects as use of humor and how trash talking between schools needs to be kept to a minimum to stop fights from occurring.

Students then came up with “peace points,” which are acts of kindness they do for other people.

Some of the peace points mentioned included taking a friend to a hospital, taking siblings to the park when their dad was not feeling well, and confronting a teacher over harassment in the classroom.

The final connection circle session involved students saying what they appreciated about one another.

Students, who only used their first names at the conference, said participating in the connection circles was a positive experience.

“It’s hard for me when I’m in a school setting to open up to my friends sometimes,” San Marcos High student Melanie said. “We just want to laugh and be funny. In connection circles, you’re able to open up and tell people what you feel is going on inside.”

Dr. Freed said the connection circles and peace-building practices have had a positive impact on local high school campuses, reducing suspensions and teacher referrals.

Gabriel Sandoval, assistant principal at Santa Barbara High School, confirmed that suspensions and referrals are down.

“I can’t say that it’s because of Peace Builders,” Mr. Sandoval said. “It’s because of multiple things, but Peace Builders has helped.”

The conference concluded with everyone singing John Lennon’s “Give Peace a Chance” in unison. Students and staff were happy with how the event turned out.

“I was surprised by how free it was,” Melanie said. “I really liked what we did. I got to get to know some people that I had never talked to before that I see all the time.”

Dr. Freed said students will use what they learned to create a more positive environment on their campuses.

“The youth that were here today are even more excited, eager and enthusiastic to do this job,” Dr. Freed said. “They’ve been very willing and open. They’re helping each other during every part of this process and they’re connecting and that’s all we ever hope for.”

